



Elindeki davulla dua eden bir Budist çocuk

İslam and Islamic Mysticism In Relation to Buddhism A Contribution to Muslim-Buddhist Dialogue

Cafer Sadık YARAN*

Budizmle İlişkili Olarak İslam ve İslam Mistisizmi:
Müslüman-Budist Diyaloguna Bir Katkı

Atıf/©: Yaran, Cafer Sadık, (2004). Budizmle İlişkili Olarak İslam ve İslam Mistisizmi, Milet ve Nihal, 2 (1), 13-34.

Özet: Dinler arası diyalog denince genellikle Hıristiyanlarla diyalog akla gelmektedir. Bu bağlamda epey bir mesafe de katedilmiştir. Müslümanlar ve Budistler arasında diyalog ise Malezya, Endonezya, Fransa gibi bazı ülkelerde son yıllarda yapılan birkaç sempozyuma rağmen, henüz başlangıç aşamasındadır. Oysa Müslümanlar ve Budistler özellikle Asya kıtasında yüzyıllardır bir arada yaşamaktadırlar. Günümüzde bu yakınlık Asya'ya özgü olmaktan çıkmış, Müslüman-Budist komşuluğu dünyanın her yerinde karşılaşılabilecek bir olgu haline gelmiştir. Bu durum, birbirinidaha yakından tanımayı, diyalogu, güveni ve işbirliğini gerektirmektedir.

Orijinal hali Japon (Jodo Shinshu) Budistlerine İslamı anlatmak amacıyla Tokyo'da verilmiş bir konferansa dayanan bu yazıda, İslam, Budizm ile ilişkilendirilebilecek noktaları biraz daha belirginleştirilerek anlatılmaya çalışılmıştır. Yazıda özel olarak Jodo Shinsu mezhebi değil, genel anlamda Budizm dikkate alınmış ve iki din arasındaki farklılıklar değil benzerlikler üzerinde durulmaya çalışılmıştır.

Yazının giriş kısmında bu iki din arasındaki birkaç genel benzerliğe dikkat çekilir. Örneğin, ikisi de dünyanın büyük dinleri arasındadır. İkisi de evrensel, yani hangi ırktan olursa olsun isteyen herkesin ihtida edebileceği dinlerdendir. Ayrıca, her iki din de, dini ve dünyevi işlerde orta yolda olmaya, ifrat ve tefritten kaçınmaya büyük önem atfetmektedirler.

Budizmin temelinde, insanla ve çektiği acıların tedavisi ile ilgili "dört yüce hakikat" in bulunduğu dikkate alınarak, İslam da, çoğu yazarın yaptığı gibi mono-

* Doç. Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi, Din Felsefesi Anabilim Dalı.

teizm ile değil, benzer şekilde, insan ile başlayıp, İslamın kurtuluş öğretisinin özetinin sunulduğu Asr suresi merkeze alınarak anlatılmıştır.

Bu bağlamda İslamda insan anlayışı ile konuya girilmiş ve İslama göre insanın çift kutuplu, özgür ve sorumlu bir varlık olarak algılandığı açıklanmıştır. Daha sonra aynı sure takip edilerek İslamın iman esaslarına geçilmiş, İslamda Allah'ın varlığı ve birliğinin merkeziliği vurgulandıktan sonra, Budizmde Tanrı sorununa geçilip, üzerinde fazla durmamakla birlikte Buda'nın Tanrı'yı inkar etmediği, ve birçok Budist mezhebinin de Dharmakaya, Sunyata, Adi-Buda, Amida Buda, Öteki Güç gibi kavramlarla nihai bir Gerçekliğin varlığını kabul ettikleri olgusundan hareketle, genel olarak ele alındığında Budizmin aslında Tanrısız bir din olmadığı belirtilmiştir. Daha sonra kitaplara iman esasları anlatılmış ve bu bağlamda da Budistlerin ehl-i kitap sayılıp sayılmayacakları üzerinde durulmuştur. Bundan sonra peygamberlere iman anlatılmış ve Buda'nın Zülkifl peygamber olup olamayacağı ile ilgili görüşler aktarılmıştır. Öteki iman esasları da belirtildikten sonra, İslamın beş şartı özetlenmiş, İslam ahlakında temel erdemler belirtilmiş, İslamın aileye, dayanışmaya ve barışa verdiği önem vurgulanmıştır.

Son olarak İslam mistisizmi ile Budizm arasındaki gerek zikir ve meditasyon gibi pratik ve teknik konularda gerekse fena ve nirvana gibi tecrübi ve teorik konulardaki kimi benzerliklere dikkat çekildikten sonra, sonuç olarak, İslam ve Budizm arasında, farklılıklar görmezlikten gelinmemekle birlikte, bir hayli temel benzerliğin var olduğu irdelenerek, Müslümanlar ve Budistlerin, insanlığın topyekün ahlaki ve manevi gelişimine ve dünyanın daha adil, barışçıl ve yaşanılabilir bir yurt olmasına daha fazla katkıda bulunabilmek için daha yoğun ve içten bir diyalog ve işbirliği içinde bulunmalarının gereği ve yararı vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mistisizm, İslam, Budizm, Diyalog.

*Verily Man is in loss,
Except such as have Faith,
and do righteous deeds,
and (join together) in the mutual enjoining of Truth,
and of Patience and Constancy.
(The Qur'an, 103: 2-3)*

*The elements which make up man produce a capacity for pain.
The cause of pain is the craving for individual life.
Deliverance from craving does away with pain.
The way of deliverance is the Eightfold Path.
(The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism)*

Introduction

The dilemma of wishing to be able to remain faithful to one's own religion and yet come to accept the validity of other traditions is one of the results of the abnormal conditions that modern men and women face and is a consequence of the anomalous conditions in which they live.¹ Several things have recently happened to create these abnormal conditions, and, looked from the positive perspective, to shatter the attitude of religious exclusivism of the past centuries. There has been the growing awareness, produced by the news media and by travel, of the sheer size and religious variety of mankind outside our own religion. Again, it has been an evident fact even to ordinary people that in the great majority of cases the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born. Another factor making for change is that the old unflattering caricatures of other religions are now being replaced by knowledge based on serious objective study. And, perhaps most importantly of all, immigrations from one country to another in recent decades have brought sizeable alien religious communities to many of the big cities of the world. These facts of recent times have theological implications, and have helped to turn the attention of the theologians of any religion to the problem of the relation of that religion to the other world religions.²

Muslims today continue to experience the presence of other religions in their midst as they have done over the centuries. By and large, through most periods of Islamic history, the relation between Muslims and religious minorities living in their midst has been peaceful. On the intellectual plane, there is a great deal of interest in the Islamic world today in religious dialogue. There have been

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 125.

² John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine", in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, (Glasgow: Fount, 1980), pp. 171-74.

some exclusivists who have opposed such dialogues, but the activity of religious dialogue has gone on for decades in the Islamic world and is now an important part of the current Islamic religious and intellectual landscape.³

Since international inter-religious gatherings between religious leaders and scholars have so far been among Muslims, Christians and Jews, “a dialogue between Muslims and Buddhists is a new configuration which has yet to be explored.”⁴ Although in recent years some international organizations including UNESCO organized conferences for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in Malaysia, Indonesia, the USA, and France, it is still possible to say that Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is at its initial stages.

In fact, in certain parts of Asia, Buddhism and Islam have coexisted for centuries. In the context of globalization and mass population movements, people from different religions tend to have more contact with each other and to know more about each other. In our present day, Muslims are a sizeable minority in practically all Buddhist nations while several Muslim-majority nations have significant Buddhist communities. Both Muslim and Buddhist communities also live in mainly Christian countries side by side.

A Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is therefore extremely relevant not only to the reality of Asia any more but also to the reality of the whole continents in the world. Muslims and Buddhists should try to leave past prejudices and stereotypes in mutual understanding and respect, should try to find common grounds between two religions and cultures, should seek to contribute together to the ethical and spiritual evolution of all humanity, and should also strive to-

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 46-53.

⁴ “Conference on ‘Global Ethics and Good Governance: Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue”, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, 5-7 May 2003, in www.unesco.org/culture/dialogue/religion/images/buddmusl.pdf, p. 2.

gether to promote shared universal virtues and values such as human rights, peace and justice in all over the modern world.

In this paper, I will summarize basic teachings, practice, ethics, and spirituality of Islam, in relation to Buddhism, where it is possible. While presenting Islam in a more or less standard or popular form, I will try to point out some similarities in the essence rather than differences in the details; and in such a short paper, I will have to omit most of the similarities, too.

A Few General Similarities

Looked at from very general perspective, it should be remembered, first of all, that Islam and Buddhism are among the biggest religions of the world today. Both of them, together with Christianity, are also among the universal religions, which accept converts among all nations; any one from any nation can become a Muslim or Buddhist if he or she wants to be.

Moreover, both Buddhism and Islam emphasize the middle way and both Buddhist and Muslims claim to be in the middle way. Middle way or moderation is recommended in the Qur'an (17: 29, 39) in relation to wisdom, and said that "Make not thy hand tied (like a niggard's) to thy neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach.... These are among the (precepts of) wisdom, which thy Lord has revealed to thee." And, the Qur'an (2: 143) says about the Muslims that "Thus have We made of you an *Ummat* justly balanced." So Muslims, like Buddhists, give so great importance to be in the middle way both in religious matters and in this worldly affairs.

Furthermore, Buddhism and Islam have a general similarity in their emphasis upon some sort of methods, meditations, worships, and good works of self-improvement, self-purification, enlightenment, and salvation like the Eight Fold Path of Buddhism and the Five Pillars of Islam. In other words, for both Buddhists and Muslims, enlightenment or salvation is not a free gift to us, but requires our personal efforts, too. Especially this aspect, namely, the exist-

ence of some personal requirements of religiosity, morality and spirituality to attain to enlightenment or salvation, seems to bring these two religions nearer to each other. Then, we can go into some more detail of Islam in relation to Buddhism.

Islam

The Arabic word "Islam" simply means "submission", and derives from a word meaning "peace". It seeks peace through submission to the will of God, *Allah*, the Creator of the universe and Master of the human beings. A Muslim obeys Allah in the way taught by the prophets, especially by the Prophet Muhammad. For Muslims, Islam is the name of the same universal truth that God revealed through all His prophets to every people, as well as is the name of specific religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam is the religion of a fifth of the world's population today. Before the Prophet Muhammad died at the age of sixty-three, the greater part of Arabia was Muslim, and within a century of his death Islam has spread to Spain in the West and as far East as China. Among the reasons for the rapid and peaceful spread of Islam was the simplicity of its doctrine. It calls for faith in only One God worthy of worship. It also repeatedly instructs man to use his powers of intelligence and observation.

When a Muslim would like to tell or explain his religion to non-Muslims, he usually starts with the articles of faiths, especially with belief in God, and then continues with the five pillars of Islam, and lastly finishes with the Islamic ethics. For it is scholarly and popularly accepted that the religion is constituted of three main parts: faith, worship, and morality. Without changing this traditional order in Islam, it is possible and preferable to start to tell Islam to the Buddhist audience with the concept of human being in Islam. For there is a short chapter (*Sûra Al-'Asr* 103) in the Qur'an that do this, that is to say, starts with a verse concerning the pitiable condition of most human beings and then mentions four features of those who

have been saved from this pitiable condition. Although this Qur'anic chapter, of course, include quite different messages in its content, it still may allow to see some similarities to four noble truth of Buddhism in starting with a negative condition of human beings and then counting four main features to be purified and saved.

Verily Man is in loss,
Except such as have Faith,
and do righteous deeds,
and (join together) in the mutual enjoining of Truth,
and of Patience and Constancy. (103: 2-3)

Some commentators of the Qur'an interpret the first verse above, "Verily Man is in loss", metaphorically. If life be considered under the metaphor of a business bargain, human being, by merely attending to his or her material gains, will lose. When he or she makes up his or her day's account in the afternoon, it will show a loss. It will only show prophet if he or she has Faith, leads a good life, and contributes to social welfare by directing and encouraging other people on the Path of Truth and Constancy.⁵

The four noble truth of the Buddha also seems to reflect a metaphorical thinking; but not a metaphor of business but a metaphor of medicine. For some writers, the fourfold structure parallels the practice of doctors of the Buddha's day: (i) diagnose a disease, (ii) identify its cause, (iii) determine whether it is curable, and (iv) outline a course of treatment to cure it. The first Truth concerns the 'illness' of *dukkha*, the 'suffering' that we are all subject to. The second concerns the cause of this 'illness': craving. The third affirms that by removing the cause of the 'illness', a cure is possible: from the cessation of craving, in the experience of *Nibbâna*, suffering

⁵ *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*, Revised and Edited by The Presidency of Islamic Researches, Ifta, (Al-Madinah: King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1410 H.), p. 2003.

ceases. The fourth outlines the way to full health: the Holy Eightfold Path, or Middle Way.”⁶

Human Being In Islam

According to Islam, the nature of human being is neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad; by contrast, human being is a two-dimensional creature from the ethical and psychological perspective.⁷ The species of human being is a kind of creature that is capable to choose both good and evil, both right and wrong. This phenomenon is expressed in the Qur’an (91: 7-8) like this: “By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its inspiration as to its wrong and its right...” This means that every human being has the natural faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong, good and bad, or piety and impiety. He can choose any of these two ways, right one or wrong one, and can act in accordance with his or her choice freely.⁸ This is one of the main reasons for most of the moral evil and suffering in the world; for while some of us prefer to choose the right way in the special circumstances of free choice, some of us may choose the wrong one, misusing their God-given or innate freedom of choice and action.

The basic weakness of man from which all of his major ills spring is described by the Qur’an as “pettiness” and “narrowness of mind”. Both the pride of man and his hopelessness and despair arise out of this pettiness. His self-destructive selfishness and the

⁶ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 47. The Path has eight factors, each described as right or perfect (*samma*): (1) right view or understanding, (2) right directed thought, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration. These factors are also grouped into three sections. Factors 3-5 pertain to moral virtue; factors 6-8 pertain to meditative cultivation of the heart/mind; factors 1-2 pertain to wisdom. (*Ibid.*, p. 68.)

⁷ Mehmet Dalkilic, *Islam Mezheplerinde Ruh* (Istanbul: Iz Yayıncılık, 2004), pp. 68-9.

⁸ Omer Aydın, *Kur’an Isiginde Kader ve Ozgurluk* (Istanbul: Beyan Yayinlari, 1998), pp. 36-8.

greed to which he is a constant prey, his hasty, panicky behaviour, his lack of self-reliance, and the fears that perpetually haunt him arise ultimately from the smallness of his mind. The unstable character of man, arising out of his narrow vision and petty mind, reveals certain basic moral tensions within which human conduct must function if it is to be stable and fruitful. Since its primary aim is to maximize moral energy, the Qur'an regards it as absolutely essential that man not violate the balance of opposing tensions. All wrong involves a violation of the balance of these tensions, what the Qur'an also describes as the "transgression of God's limits" (2: 187, 229, 230; 4: 13; 9: 112; 58: 4; 65:1).⁹

Someone may object to that view questioning why a good God did not create human beings in the way in which they always choose the right way and never choose and do the wrong one. This question is not too difficult to answer. For being open to evil as well as good does seem to be a necessary condition of being a free agent; and freedom is worth having for human beings even in the face of some occasional misuses. For what makes an action and its agent really valuable is the condition that it was chosen and done freely and not by any external compulsion.

In addition, free human beings can get help to choose right rather than wrong both from their reason and conscience granted to all of them and also from –according to Islam – divine revelation and inspiration granted to some of them. For, according to Islam, every child is born with the *fitra*, an innate disposition towards virtue, knowledge, and beauty in such a degree that may guide the person towards the right way but not as much as to violate that person's freedom. Islam even considers itself to be the 'primordial religion', *din al-hanif*; it seeks to return human being to his or her original, true nature in which he or she is in harmony with creation,

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), pp. 25-28.

inspired to do good, and confirming the Oneness of God.¹⁰ The divine revelation also helps human beings to find and follow the right way, without violating human freedom. After mentioning that human being is a free creature to choose right and wrong, the Qur'an (91: 8-9), for example, advises to human beings that "Truly he succeeds that purifies it [Soul or Self], and he fails that corrupts it!"

How can, however, a human being purifies his self, preserves it from selfish corruptions; and how can he or she become a perfect human being who is not among the majority of human beings, who are "in loss" or in suffering? According to Islam, as is seen in the Qur'anic chapter above, the first thing to do is to have the faith.

The Articles Of Faith In Islam

The articles of faith in Islam are usually stated as six items. Muslims believe, first, in One God (*Allah*); secondly, in the Angels created by Him; thirdly, in the holy Books given to the prophets; fourthly, in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; fifthly, in the Day of Judgement in life after death; and sixthly, in predestination. We can dwell on some of them in a bit more detail.

The Concept Of God In Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion. According to Islam, God is one and unique. There is none like Him. He has no partner, no children and no parents. He is eternal, and everywhere. He is creator of the universe, which is not self-explanatory. He is merciful, compassionate, and loving. He sent prophets to guide us, to tell us how to live like good human beings and be happy.

The God of Islam is both knowable and unknowable. The knowledge of God is to be arrived at through different sources. The first source is revelation, the Qur'an. The second source is reason

and observation.¹¹ The third source is religious and mystical experience.¹² All of these sources and stages, however, will give us knowledge of God only in so far as He is related to us. But in His essential being and essence, we do not claim to have any knowledge of God. For it is said in the Qur'an (20: 110) that: "He knows what is before or after or behind them. But they shall comprehend Him not." Even by analogy he cannot be comprehended; because, in His essence, as the Qur'an says, "there is nothing whatever like unto him". (42: 11)

The doctrine of God the One, the Infinitely Good and All-Merciful, as stated in the Quran, does not only emphasize utter transcendence, although there are powerful expressions of this truth. The Qur'an also accentuates God's nearness to us, stating that He is closer to us than ourselves (see the Qur'an, 50: 16) and that He is present everywhere, as the Qur'an stated (2: 115): "To Allah belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's Face. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing." So, "the traditional religious life of a Muslim is based on a rhythmic movement between the poles of transcendence and immanence, of rigor and compassion, of justice and forgiveness, of the fear of punishment and hope for mercy based on God's love for us."¹³

The Concept Of God In Relation To Buddhism

A Buddhist writer says that he had learned from his "experience in Indonesia, which is an Islamic country, that there was no way that you say to an Islamic audience, 'Buddhism doesn't believe in God.' That would lead to the instant closing of the door."¹⁴ In this case, we

¹¹ See, Cafer S. Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God: With Contributions from Contemporary Western Philosophy of Religion* (Washington, D.C.: R.V.P., 2003).

¹² See, Cafer S. Yaran, *Muslim Religious Experiences* (Lampeter: Religious Experience Research Centre, 2004).

¹³ Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Alex Berzin, "Some Common Features of Islam and Buddhism: A Conversation with Snjezana Akpınar and Alex Berzin", in

had better to consider here whether Buddhism really an atheist religion or not?

Although it is true that the Buddha did not give much importance to metaphysics, and instead of it, emphasized ethics, suffering and release from suffering, he never denied the existence of God. Obvious denial of the existence of God, and indifference to metaphysical matters in favour of more urgent moral matters, and even a refusal to affirm the existence of any deity among many Hindu deities are different things. "If atheism is the denial of the existence of God, it would be quite misleading to describe Buddhism as atheistic."¹⁵ Buddhism is neither 'atheistic' in the usual connotation of this term, nor a 'philosophy' in the sense of being man-made.¹⁶

Various writers refer to different Buddhist concepts such as the Dharmakâya, Sûnyatâ, Nirvâna, Adi-Buddha, which may be considered to be a parallel or similar to the concept of God at least in a much broader and much more abstract sense. For some scholars, "the Buddhist term 'Sûnyatâ' might be the least misleading expression to use to refer to this ultimate reality."¹⁷ Some other scholars mention the concepts of Dharmakâya and Nirvâna:

"In summary: whereas most religions emphasize the 'transcendent' aspect of Ultimate Reality, namely the Supreme Being or God, Buddhism characteristically emphasizes the 'immanent' aspect, namely the Supreme State or *Nirvana*. Nevertheless, Buddhism, in its total breadth, contains both aspects, the immanent and the transcendent, recognizing Ulti-

www.berzinarchives.com/islam/common_features_islam_buddhism.html, p. 2.

¹⁵ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 43.

¹⁶ William Stoddart, *Outline of Buddhism* (Oaktan: The Foundation of Traditional Studies, 1998), p. 1.

¹⁷ See, Paul Badham, *Christian Beliefs about God and Christ in relation to Jodo Shinshû Buddhism* (Tokyo: Honganji International Buddhist Study Center, 1994), p. 30.

mate Reality either as a Supreme State (*Nirvâna*) or as a Supreme Being (*Dharmakâya*). In either case, the essential nature of Ultimate reality remains the same: it is absolute, infinite, and perfect. Thus, in its conception of Ultimate Reality, Buddhism is essentially in accord with every other world religion.”¹⁸

Some other scholars speak of the concept of Adibuddha especially within the context of dialogue with the Muslims. A Buddhist scholar tells that during a lecture tour of Indonesia in 1988, he had many discussions with Buddhist monks about the issue of God in Buddhism. Then he continues as follows:

Since Adibuddha can be interpreted as the clear light primordial consciousness, and since all appearances of samsâra and nirvana are the play or ‘creation’ of that mind, we concluded that there is no reason to feel uncomfortable in saying that Buddhism accepts a creator God. The fact that Buddhism asserts Adibuddha not to be an individual separate being, but something present in each sentient being, is just a matter of theological differences concerning the nature of God. Many Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Hindu thinkers assert that God is abstract and present in all beings.¹⁹

Therefore, from his experience in Indonesia, he agrees, on the basis of Adibuddha, that Buddhism does accept a creator God, but with its own unique interpretation. He says finally that “once this common ground was established, I was easily able to begin a comfortable dialogue with the Islamic theologians in Turkey.”²⁰ In other words, “speaking in terms of the clear light mind as the beginningless creator of beginningless appearances, and of Buddha as a revealer of higher truths, we had a good basis for lively and friendly dialogue.”²¹

¹⁸ Stoddart, *Outline of Buddhism*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Alexander Berzin, “Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue”, in www.berzinarchives.com/islam/islamic_buddhist_dialog.html, p. 4.

²⁰ Berzin, “Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue”, p. 4.

²¹ Berzin, “Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue”, p. 6.

The Books of God

Another Islamic article of faith is to believe in the books of God. For Muslims, God gave guidance to man through the prophets in the form of Books. The sacred book of Muslims is called the Qur'an. A Muslim believes in all the books of God, but follows the Qur'an alone. It is found today exactly as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. A Muslim believes in it, reads some parts of it daily and tries to follow it in his or her life. The Qur'an deals with all the subjects which concern us as human beings: wisdom, doctrine, worship, and law, but its basic theme is the relationship between God and His creatures. At the same time it provides guidelines for a just society, proper human conduct and equitable economic system.

In the Qur'anic view, God's truth and guidance are not restricted but are universally available to all people. It is said in the Qur'an (35: 24) that "there never was a people, without a warner having lived among them (in the past)." In Islam, the Jews and Christians are called the 'People of the Book' (*'ahl al-kitâb'*); and those who are considered to be the 'people of the book' are seen more privileged in comparison to other non-Muslim communities.

The Concept Of The "People Of The Book" and The Buddhists

There have been recent attempts within Islam to understand Hindus and Buddhists also as 'People of the Book'.²² In fact, it is not only a recent affect, "some of the most authoritative Muslim scholars of the sub-continent during the Moghul period called the Hindus '*ahl al-kitâb*', belonging to the chain of prophets preceding Islam and beginning with Adam".²³ In a conference for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue at Columbia University, "after discussing the Islamic concept of 'people of the book' it was agreed that Buddhists, too, were a

²² Harold Coward, *Pluralism in the World Religions: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 66.

²³ Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 132.

'people of the book' since the Dharma is set forth in religious scriptures collectively called the Dharmakâya."²⁴

The Prophets and The Prophet Muhammad

Another article of faith in Islam is to believe in the prophets. For Muslims, God gave His guidance through the prophets. God sent prophets to all people at different times. It is said in the Qur'an (13: 7) that "for every people a guide has been provided." They were men of great virtue and character; and were the true spiritual leaders and guides of human society. Nevertheless, a prophet cannot be God at all; he is a human being like us, with a difference that he receives guidance or revelation from God. A Muslim believes in, loves and respects all the prophets; but does not worship them.

For Muslims, Muhammad is the Last prophet. He was born in Mecca in the year 570 CE. He was of a deeply religious nature, and had long detested the decadence of his society. It became his habit to meditate from time to time in the Cave of *Hira* near the summit of *Jabal al-Nur*, the 'Mountain of Light' near Mecca. At the age of forty, while engaged in a meditative retreat, he received his first revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel. This revelation, which continued for twenty-three years, is known as the Qur'an. In the last year of his life, when the Prophet went to Mecca for pilgrimage (*Hajj*), he addressed his celebrated sermon to 140.000 Muslims there, in which he gave a resume of his teachings:

Belief in One God without images or symbols; equality of all the believers without distinction of race or class; the superiority of individuals being based solely on piety; sanctity of life, property and honour; abolition of interest, and of vendettas and private justice; better treatment of women; obligatory inheritance and distribution of the property of deceased persons among near relatives of both sexes, and removal of the possi-

²⁴ "Conference on 'Global Ethics and Good Governance: Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue", UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, 5-7 May 2003, in www.unesco.org/culture/dialogue/religion/images/buddmusl.pdf, p. 3.

bility of the cumulation of wealth in the hands of the few. The Qur'an and the conduct of the Prophet were to serve as the bases of law and a healthy criterion in every aspect of human life.²⁵

As mentioned above, Muslims believe in the existence of a large number of prophets (traditionally given as 124.000) sent to every people. This large number of prophets indicates implicitly that all nations must have been given a religion sent to them by God. Although generally only the Abrahamic tradition has been considered, the principle of the universality of revelation applies to all nations.²⁶

The Prophet Dhu'l-Kifl and The Buddha

Not only have some of the most authoritative Muslim scholars of the sub-continent during the Moghul period called the Hindus 'people of the book', but also some of the Muslim Indian commentators have considered the prophet Dhu'l-Kifl mentioned in the Qur'an to be the Buddha of Kifl (Kapilavasta) and the 'Fig Tree' of the Qur'anic chapter (*sura*) 95 to be the Bodi Tree under which the Buddha received his illumination."²⁷ Dhu'l-Kifl is mentioned in the Qur'an (21: 85-86) as follows: "And (remember) Isma'il, Idris, and Dhu'l-Kifl, all (men) of constancy and patience; We admitted them to our Mercy: for they were of the Righteous ones."

As is to be expected, the Muslims see all 'divine descents' or *Avatâras* of any other religion at most as prophets in the Islamic sense, so that such a treatment of the Buddha should not be in any way surprising.²⁸

²⁵ Muhammad Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam* (Lahore: Centre Culturel Islamique, 1980), p. 19.

²⁶ Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 131.

²⁷ Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 132. See also, Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Prophète De L'Islam*, I, (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1959) ; and, Imran N. Hosein, *Islam and Buddhism in the Modern World* (Singapore :CRTDM, 1999), p. 6.

²⁸ Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 123.

The six articles of faith in Islam are followed by the five pillars of Islam. We should very briefly mention them, too.

The Five Pillars of Islam

There are five pillars on which the whole structure of Islam stands. These are faith, prayer, welfare money for the poor, fasting, and pilgrimage.

The first pillar is the declaration of faith that “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger”. This faith is followed by action; and it is believed that faith and action must go together.

The second pillar of Islam is prayer. A Muslim prays five times a day. For the Muslims, prayer is a direct link between the worshipper and God, and helps a man to remember God and to follow His commands. It keeps a man away from evil and reminds him that he is responsible from all of his actions.

The third pillar is welfare money for the poor. For most purposes this involves the payment each year of two and a half percent of one’s capital. For Islam stands for brotherhood and social justice; and says that the poor and the needy have rights in the wealth of the rich. It is a great sin not to share one’s wealth with the needy and let them suffer from hunger and disease.

The fourth pillar is fasting during the ninth month, *Ramadan*, of the Islamic calendar. Fasting begins at daybreak and ends at sunset; between dawn and sunset, it is abstained from eating, drinking, and sexual relations. It is a means of spiritual training and self-purification.

The fifth pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage is visiting the *Ka’bah* in Mecca at least once in one’s lifetime if one can afford it physically and financially. Muslims of all countries and colours gather in Mecca in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar

and worship God. This strengthens the spirit of unity, equality and brotherhood.

When we think about these pillars of Islam in relation to the devotional practice and meditation of Buddhism, we might see some similarities. For the Buddhists do some devotional practice such as prostration three times before prayer, making generous offerings to the needy and those devoted to spiritual life, repeated recitation of Buddha's names and sacred syllables (*mantras*) counted on rosary beads, pilgrimage to holy places, and meditation. And Buddha also instructed his followers not to drink even a drop of alcohol.²⁹

The Ethical Teachings of Islam

It would be too lengthy to cite here all the ethical exhortations of the Qur'an or Islam. The basic moral advices may be found in three codes in three Qur'anic chapters (*sûra*). The first of these codes is in the *Sûra Isrâ* (17: 23-41). "In the *first code* there are four positive commands: to know but one God, to be kind to parents, to give to the poor, and to be moderate in spending. There are also seven definite prohibitions: from the practice of infanticide, from adultery, from killing unjustly, from robbing orphans, from cheating in trade, from believing false reports, and from showing pride." The *second code* is in the *Sûra al-Furqan* (25: 64-75). It "explains that blessedness is conditional, in that it is for those who are lowly; for those who are discriminating in matters that have to do with spending, killing, or chastity; for those who are penitent; and for those who are truthful." The *third code* is in the *sura* called *Luqman* (31: 11-17). It "gives three injunctions with reference to conduct towards Allah: to have gratitude to Him, to associate no other with Him, and to remember that He brings everything to light. It also gives three injunctions for conduct in human relations: to observe duties to parents, to seek in

²⁹ Alexander Berzin, "Introduction to Buddhism from an Islamic Viewpoint", in www.berzinarchives.com/islam/buddhist_islamic_view.html, pp. 6-7.

prayer to be steadfast, reasonable, and patient; and to live so as to avoid pride and ignorance.”³⁰

In addition, the peace and security offered by a stable family unit is greatly valued in Islam, and seen as essential for the spiritual growth of its members.

Freedom of religion and conscience is laid down by the Qur’an itself (2: 256): “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” Racism is incomprehensible to Muslims, for the Qur’an (49: 13) speaks of human equality in the following terms:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you.”

Peace is essential and war is the last resort in Islam; and war is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the law which include prohibitions against harming civilians. The Qur’an (8: 61) says that “if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace.” The term *jihad* literally means ‘struggle’, and Muslims believe that there are two kinds of *jihad*. The other *jihad* is the inner struggle which everyone wages against egoistic desires, for the sake of attaining inner peace.

Especially the Muslim mystics, or better to say, Sufis, were not much concerned about external *jihad*. Instead their passion was to purify the soul from all kinds of evils. They believed that purifying the soul was more important than external *jihad*. They maintained that true peace and equity within a society could be attained only as Muslims waged war against the desires of the soul.³¹

³⁰ Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics* (London: SPCK, 1953), p. 266. See also, George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 29-48.

³¹ Mustafa Koylu, *Islam and Its Quest for Peace: Jihad, Justice and Education* (Washington, D.C.: R.V.P., 2003), p. 69.

Islamic Mysticism or Sufism

Sufism is the main mystical tradition of Islam. It has many of the characteristics of monasticism, but does not usually preach celibacy. It does enjoin mortification of the flesh, and exalts the ideal of poverty, but it includes ordinary members of society in its ranks, with no distinction of clerical versus lay. It emphasizes the love of God, and teaches that God and the Sufis have a special relationship. They are perpetually engaged in remembrance (*dhikr*) of Him. Sufism also constitutes a Path (*tariqa*), which begins with repentance and leads through a number of 'stations', representing virtues such as absolute trust in God, to a higher series of ecstatic 'states'. "These culminate in the 'passing away' (*fanâ*) of the mystic (or perhaps just of his lower soul, or of his human attributes) and the subsequent 'survival' (*baqâ*) of his transformed personality (or perhaps just of his higher soul, or alternatively of his essence now adorned by the attributes of God)."³²

The Sufis are distinguished from other Muslims partly because they consider the remembrance of God, in the form of mentioning His names as instructed by their shaykhs, as incumbent, not merely recommended. For them, the essence of all the ritual activities is remembering God. People should pray and fast to remember God, to keep Him constantly in mind. "There is no god but God" is commonly called "the best *dhikr*." But some others hold that the single remembrance, the mention of the name *Allah* alone, is superior. The goal in remembering God is to annihilate everything other than God and to come to subsist in the divine.³³

What the Sufis are seeking is "extinction (*fanâ*) of the created in the Uncreated, of the temporal in the Eternal, of the finite in the

³² Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1989), p. 3.

³³ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), p. 59.

Infinite".³⁴ In a life of sincere obedience to the will of God, lived abstemiously and meditatively, guided by the word of God, the life of His Prophet, and the example of His saints, the Sufi is himself the recipient of such marks of favour as God may choose to vouchsafe him. Passing through the various states and stages of the spiritual pilgrimage, he encounters many proofs of the special relationship in which he stands to God. "So guided and favoured, the Muslim mystic may hope even in this mortal life to win a glimpse of immortality, bay passing away from self (*fanâ*) into the consciousness of survival in God (*baqâ*). After death and judgement, he aspires to dwell forever with the angels and prophets, the saints and saved, in the near and blissful Presence of the Almighty."³⁵

Sufism And Buddhism

Some scholars speak of the impact of Buddhist ideas on Sufism. One of them summarizes this relationship as follows: Certain Sufi exercises like holding back of breath seem to have been derived through Buddhist channels from yogic *prânyama*. The Sufi concept of 'peace with all' seems to have been borrowed from Mahayana Buddhism. Also, the concentration of the Sufi student on the teacher's image in the early stages of an initiate's education seems to have been adopted from Buddhism. And the Sufi use of a rosary seems to be borrowed from either a Christian or an Indo-Buddhist tradition. It is clear that Sufism willingly borrowed from Buddhism, but it is also evident that at heart the two traditions remain specific and original.³⁶ For some people, the final aim and experience called "nirvana" by the Buddhist and "*fanâ*" by the Sufis are at least very similar experiences.³⁷

³⁴ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975), p. 25.

³⁵ A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), pp. 13-4.

³⁶ Coward, *Pluralism in the World Religions*, pp. 72-3.

³⁷ See, S. Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament* (New York: Atma Boks, 1987), pp. 1-3.

Conclusion

We have seen that both Islam and Buddhism are very concerned with the condition of human beings; and they are in agreement that most human beings unfortunately are in loss or suffering. Similarly both of them offer human beings various ways to release them from suffering or loss, such as the four noble truth and eight-fold path of Buddhism and six articles of faith and five pillars of Islam. Although there are some differences between them, on which we have not dwelt in this paper, they are not as opposed to each other in their teachings and ways of life as they may at first sight appear to be. Buddhism is not simply an atheistic religion, as sometimes alleged to be. Some Medieval or contemporary Muslim scholars see the Buddha among the prophets, and the Buddhist among the 'people of the book'. Morality and mysticism of both traditions are even more similar to each other in comparison to their metaphysics and meditation. Both of them are very concerned about mercy, compassion and, both internal and external peace. Therefore, there seems to be no obstacle for Muslims and Buddhist to be in friendly dialogue and cooperation to contribute to ethical and spiritual evolution of human beings and also to create a much more just, peaceful, and pleasant world.



Islam and Islamic Myticism in Relation to Buddhism

Citation/©: Yaran, Cafer Sadık, (2004). Islam and Islamic Myticism in Relation to Buddhism, *Milel ve Nihal*, 2 (1), 13-34.

Abstract: A Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is at its initial stage; but it is extremely relevant not only to the reality of Asia any more but also to the reality of the whole continents in the world.

In this article, after a brief description of Islam and discussion of such topics as whether Buddhism is simply an atheistic religion as usually allaged, whether the Buddha may be the Prophet Dhu'l-Kifl, whether the Buddhist may be considered 'the People of the Book', and also after the dealing with some ethical and mystical similarities, it is concluded that the Muslims and the Buddhists have many common values and virtues.

Therefore, there should develop a more friendly dialogue and affective cooperation between them to contribute to the ethical and spiritual evolution of human beings and also to create a more just and peaceful world.

Key Words: Mysticism, Islam, Buddhism, Dialogue.